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FROM THE MIND OF

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By

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Preface

It is hard to know where to begin when reflecting on how far I have come as a student, an artist, and an individual during my time at the University of Houston. Perhaps it is best to say that I hope, out of all my essays and other writings during my time here, that this brief statement regarding the importance of my studies, my evolution as a poet, and the culmination of my creative endeavors thus far, will represent the essential combination of mental and emotional retrospection that I deem the cornerstone of any sort of productive reflection. Academia has become intertwined with my identity, and poetry, the desire to get better, and the drive to make something great have become my primary focuses in life. As a spiritual person who holds close an unshaking belief in God, I can honestly say that I believe my life's purpose to be inseparable from writing and creative work. I have faith that, whatever the future holds, and whatever pathways diverge, I will always, in some way, shape, or form, continue the journey with this inseparability in mind, and that I will always look back on this thesis and my time as an undergraduate with fondness and gratitude. This manuscript is the culmination of the first step in my life's work.

Although I still have an incredibly long way to go, I have made much progress as a writer. This progress has been marked largely by realizations concerning poetry's fundamentals. The most important of these is that it is the image that carries emotion. It took me longer than I would have liked to fully understand this simple concept, but I am grateful for the understanding and to the teachers along the way who have helped me with the discovery. As someone whose well-being coincides with an ability to remain aware of and analyze cerebral properties connected to anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and

depression, I do a lot of thinking, and I place a lot of energy into therapy and into the consideration of a strong and diverse array of feelings. Naturally, these factors make their way into my poetry, and I tend to write in abstractions, using cliché words and phrases in an attempt to express myself. I have realized that, despite the best intentions, regardless of how powerful the feelings that inspire such language may be, it is not enough to say what I feel—it must be shown. I must remind myself of the old “show, don’t tell” adage preached by many a creative writing teacher. I must acknowledge its universal truth and its importance to what makes a successful poem. “Show, don’t tell” is another way of saying that it is the image that carries emotion. When I use my thoughts and feelings as fuel for imagery, I can create something tangible, relatable, and interesting. Even if nothing else had come from my workshops and professor-student relationships at UH, I would consider the time and effort spent arriving at this conclusion well worthwhile. I understand now the distinction my first creative writing professor explained to me as the difference between the private and the personal in a poem. The private are those familiar expressions, the kinds of things one might share with one’s mother as a young person, while the personal are those images that embody universal emotions. Readers can relate to the personal, and in so doing, interpret the language and the emotions in their own way.

“The Bear,” by Galway Kinnell, is my favorite example of how imagery can evoke emotion. In fact, Kinnell does it so well that the poem is difficult to read. Tracing the speaker’s bear-hunting experience, he writes,

I hack
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length

and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep. (48-53)

To hack is one thing. To hack a ravine in the thigh of a dead creature still warm with life is another. To tear something down is common. To tear a dead bear down his whole length is uncommon. Kinnell chooses simple, subtle words and combines these words into striking, often awful images. Although my images are not so brutal, I do something akin to this in “Oregon Trail.” The lines, “As my horse coughed her lungs and wrought decay / and lifeless trees all burnt with gray and shame / drew patterns in the starless, lightless sky,” (1-3), are the result of an effort to relate fatigue and hopelessness. Similarly, in “Abyss,” I write,

I have not met
A single gilled thing, crustacean,
Or coral ribcage. I have filled my lungs with salt.
I cannot hold my breath any longer
Than when I was a child. (9-13)

These lines are meant to be embodiments of loneliness and failure. By using imagery as a vessel, I can invoke feelings in readers where abstractions would fail. Words like “hopelessness” and “loneliness” do not show anything. A poem needs something far more concrete.

Music, next to the image, is all-important in a poem. I did not fully understand the fundament of pattern and variation until I took the poetic forms class. I now have a better grasp of meter and form and how they can be manipulated to create meaning. The best

example I know of this is Robert Frost's "Design." The poem's first sentence reads, "I found a dimpled spider, fat and white, / On a white heal-all, holding up a moth / Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth" (1-3). Frost commands the sonnet form, wasting no time in establishing a rhythm and laying a cornerstone of death that he builds upon throughout the stanza. Line one is perfect iambic pentameter, but Frost immediately deviates from it in line two with a pyrrhic, a trochee, and a spondee. This is the first of many examples where the poet breaks from regular meter to compliment the poem's images and ideas. Here, the unusual meter symbolizes the unusual occurrence of a white heal-all. The heal-all is by nature blue, not white. A white heal-all is a mutation, and this idea fits in with the grotesque suggestions of the poem, as does a simile in line three that compares the moth's body to "a white piece of rigid satin cloth."

I have a goal to write a sonnet that shows the economy of language displayed by Frost in "Design," or to show at least a semblance of it. I have not yet written a sonnet that I would consider a success. I have written ghosts of sonnets, but not one that completely adheres to tradition (insofar as anything "completely adheres" to tradition). Pattern and variation, however, are not principles limited to the metrical and formal; they are just as important in free verse, and my poem, "Gone Home," is one example of how I have applied repetition and deviation for effect. Usually, I would not use "that says" (2), "because" (5), "as I" (11), "as we" (14), or "for me" (17) as lines of poetry, but in "Gone Home" I do to create anticipation and to establish a pattern that can be broken. When I interrupt the repetition and deviate from the tercet, I heighten the speaker's soft, trance-like voice to an uncomfortable awareness to intensify his experience—and that of the reader's.

There are certain structures in poetry, certain tactics that many poets use, be it consciously or subconsciously. I often notice what the book *Structure and Surprise* terms “The Descriptive-Meditative Structure” when I consider what a poet is doing and how she is doing it. To be clear, “... the term... is imperfect; it names only two parts in what is essentially a three-part structure: description, meditation, and re-description” (Marks, 123). A poem of this structure begins with the speaker’s description of something external. This description inspires a meditation, which leads to some kind of insight, and in turn, a renewed understanding of the originally described scene. I see this structure in the poetry of my fellow students often, and it is a hallmark of my own. The best examples from my work are “Ventus,” “Infidelity,” and “Midnight in New Ulm.” Each of these poems contains a description of nature and contemplates the relationship between nature and humankind. In “Infidelity,” for instance, the speaker describes the outside world: flies, a strange ant, the wind, a dog, etc. He is largely annoyed by what he observes until another force enters the poem, a seemingly serious email that causes him to reconsider his surroundings. He then sees his environment as a buffer against life’s chaos. The descriptive-meditative structure is prevalent for good reason. It effectively represents a very human and relatable habit. We see ourselves in other people, places, and things every day. It is natural that, through poetry, our understanding of internal and external is transformed.

I could list more poetic principles and how they have informed my work, but I would rather end by acknowledging my favorite poem and what it means to me. The possibility of multitudinous interpretation is one of the main reasons I fell in love with poetry, and it is one of the main reasons that my favorite poem is T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste*

Land. Although it may not be apparent in the collection that composes this thesis, I have started to see Eliot's influence on my work. I admire the way he creates an elaborate labyrinth of meaning via extensive allusion and narrative misdirection. It is an astounding example of disillusionment and confusion—yet, it does not sacrifice a search for meaning. *The Waste Land* is the quintessential modernist poem, but it transcends the label of modernism. The best works of art are discernable from a vast distance, not limited by time or place, and applicable to everything that is happening or will happen. I interpret Richard Hugo's commentary about truth conforming to music in *The Triggering Town* as a manifestation of this fact. Truth conforms not only to a poem's music or a newly discovered, unplanned subject, but to how a work of art—any work of art—is experienced by its audience. "Truth conforming" is a universal artistic rule: a masterpiece becomes part of perpetual conversation because it can be endlessly interpreted, studied, debated, and appreciated. It captures a sum of human experience with a single breath that it holds forever.

Thus far, I have not written anything that can compare to *The Waste Land*, but my favorite moments during workshops are those when I witness a semblance of this interpretive phenomenon occur as the result of my work. When someone gleans something powerful that I had not intended or even thought of, it is a reminder that poetry possesses a magical force, and the experience always leaves me feeling rejuvenated. I hope that, as I continue to implement the lessons I learn, I will continue to have these kinds of experiences, continue to access and grow those traits in myself that enable me to write meaningful poetry, and, eventually, write something that can, indeed, compare.

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Dedicated to my parents, Lewis and Dorena Ward, without whose love, sacrifice, patience, understanding, and endless support, I could never have come this far.

Mom and Dad, thank you.

This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: *must* I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple, "*I must*," then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest and most indifferent hour, must become a sign and witness to this impulse.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

from the Mind of

AUBREY L. WARD III

Oregon Trail

As my horse coughed her lungs and wrought decay
and lifeless trees all burnt with gray and shame
drew patterns in the starless, lightless sky,

I thought I saw a friend who said hello.
But then the fog, it sighed and turned away:
a spectral form, not man, not ghost, not black,
not white, not form nor host, not spite, not kind,
but just a breeze that calmed my creature's mane

and called me by my name. And when I turned
to smile and say hello, the fog—it turned
the other way. I coughed. It walked away.

The Local News

I sit in my dad's maroon leather recliner,
My slipper-adorned
feet propped

in front of me. He's gone to bed after a long
day of watching foot
ball to

gether. The dog sleeps on her bed by the big-screen
tv, snoring. The
shaded

lamp over my right shoulder casts a faint light, e
nough to keep the room
alive.

The local news shows a big red dot on a map
where a man on a
horse was

hit and killed. A worn old woman cries. A pretty
young woman reports.
My cell

phone rings in my pocket, the Stargaze tone. Across
the rippling crimson-
eme

rald screen: 713-496-97
07. His
voice is

either angry or excited when he says my
name. Then, "It's Ron Pe
ters man."

"Oh," I say, "hey." "How are you brother?" he asks. "Um.
Yeah, I'm alright." A
differ

ent, equally pretty reporter stands outside
a hospital, where
a crazed

patient was arrested. I'm standing with Ron on
his balcony, talking
king a

smoke break between Call of Duty matches, talking
about God and how
ever

nothing's going to be awesome. I'm sitting out
side a Starbucks with
Ron, chain

smoking and talking about his relationship
problems. The downtown
lights poll

ute the sky the way the smoke pollutes our lungs. I'm
sitting on the couch
in Ron's

new house, holding his newborn baby girl. I love
her like a niece. "I'll
text you

Tuesday morning, and we can map out a place," Ron
says. Ron and I were
once friends.

"Sounds good," I say, not knowing what ever happened,
not knowing what else
to say.

Afternoon Tea

Three clouds against an infant blue:
the first, a boat sailing across
brass-brown oceans; the next,
an animal, a yellow hue, amoeba-shaped
spots, a long giraffe. Finally,
the simplest of all, a familiar pot of tea—
a white kettle hovering mid-day
to spite night's claim to the carafe.
And my brain has the wherewithal
to remind me of my past: afternoon tea,
interrupted by a robber's handgun blast,
the waitress's dead eyes when she fell,
the whistling behind the diner's counter,
a white pot, blood across a coat of baby blue.

Self-Portrait

If my stomach had eyes, it would stare
from the mirror, empty, steeply sloped, full
of intent. If my stomach had a nose, it'd have
a deviated septum. Snore would escape
the muffled airways during dreams of better z's.
If my stomach had a mouth, it would say, "Snap out,
move on, get on with your day, you creep—
Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."
If my stomach had ears, they'd be too big
and awkward and never listen to me when I speak.
If my stomach could feel,
it would be tired, ready to give up.
It would bear the too-tight restriction of my belt's clutch,
crack from the pressure, spill out, an egg, crushed.

Ataraxy

“They say it’s not about the destination.”
With just his eyes, the watcher spoke to me.
Then what’s the point of migration?

I watched the geese, still far from resignation.
Soon they would be outstretched over the sea.
They say it’s not about the destination.

The blind man watched with endless fascination.
Just then, I heard my voice say, “Finally,
what’s the point of migration?”

Within his calloused eyes, fierce resignation.
This time, he turned his head to look at me:
“They say it’s not about the destination.”

A splash, ruffled wings unfurled. A laceration
of faith—feeling me leave, he said to me,
“Then what’s the point of migration?”

Some days I want to end the desolation,
but then I hear the seer say to me,
“They say it’s not about the destination;
so what’s the point of the migration?”

Break

Break
 Break
Break
 Break
 Break
 Break
Break
 Break

I. Form Break

Decades of wear and tear,
hard winds slapping against,
rains banging, eroding,
cement walls cleaner,
but weaker,
in the sunshine.
A seam,
a crack in the concrete,

spreading,
like neural pathways,
branching out,
nowhere else to go
but inside, nothing left to do
but break.

II. Breaking Self

One by one, I am thorough with my bones.
Not one is left uncracked,
Unportruded, inside out,
Poking through my skin,
Grotesque, bloody flesh,
Shrapnelled out from the inside.
A bomb went off behind a metal wall.

Ventus

Do windchimes
feel afraid
as they anticipate
the morning's first wind?
For some,
someplace,
it could be minutes or hours
since their presence has been known.

Out here,
it's never more than seconds,
and the soft ringing
accompanies the gentle wind
that moves through the leaves and branches,
through this world,
and the dog plays with his frisbee,
digs and scratches
at the fresh grassy dirt.

A cow bellows
something like a "moo."
It is so fresh
and new,
a reminder:
woman and man
are not the only beasts
in this world.

A pickup truck startles me
as it rattles by, churns dust,
tosses pebbles
from the road.

The dog has graduated
from his frisbee
to a large and formidable stick,
and, trying to satisfy a licentious itch,
rolls around
on his back.

A bee visits me,
but leaves
with its stinger—and life—intact.

There is more to this world than what humans make.

The bee
buzzes by me again,
but again,
it does not sting.

The wind tears through my notebook.

A buzzard dives, looking for something dead.

The sky
moves through the horizon.

Banausic

Words climb the crevices in my brain,
Clawing, digging polished pitons
Into soft pink sheetrock.

The ones that make it to the top
Might become more than thoughts.
The ones that make it to the top
Are unfamiliar,
Yet familiar, like dreams.

They become free, like a memory.
They need not raise their lustrous hooks
In a feeble attempt to touch
A future they don't know.

Some of them might stand and watch
As their brothers fall into history.
Some might turn away.
Others will jump from the edge to follow.

The ones who stay
Will find the next climb.
They might make sets with ceilings,
Put a camera in the floor,
Or learn to cringe at a cliché.

The ones who keep going
Will look back, and they will know.
They will see the world
Transfixed by fear,

And they will see their lives
As rare, phenomenal,
New.

Infidelity

The flies are bad today.
They cling to me,
My sleeve, my skin,
My hair and ears.

The breeze is stagnant,
Lukewarm. It plucks acorns,
Tosses them at my table.

An ant, one foot away
On the table's light brown wood,
Reigns hideous. It looks like
Two ants stuck together:
Its hind legs
Mingle with its body,
Tickle its pelvis and back,
Then raise up like wings,
One on either side.
It faces me.
I don't even know
If it knows I'm here.
You'd think I should feel intrigued.

The wind gusts, rips
My notebook open,
A crisp flutter of lined paper.
An acorn bounces off the table.
The dog lies in wait
For the next leaf to take flight.
He looks more like a cat the way he poses.

He pounces,
Catches a leaf in his mouth,
Retreats a few feet,
And spits it out.

He will do this one-hundred times today,
Surmising his attack,
Executing it gracefully,
Never sure what to do,
How to react,
Upon his success.

Wrangler, the black and white border collie,
The smartest dog I know.
Yet, he spends about half his time
Wrestling with a stick.
He cannot balance it,
And he has yet to find a surefire way
To pick it up.

Another ant slinks across my table.
It is orange,
With a black head.
I lift my notebook
And let it pass.

A hornet comes and goes.

Wrangler runs in circles,
Chases butterflies,
Digs his hole a little deeper,
And repeats.
When he brings his stick
And lays it at my feet,
“Not right now,” I’ll say.
He’ll entertain himself for another hour
Before trying again.

I look at my phone.

The cows graze so slowly and lazily
That I become angry.

Beyond them, only green,
Some powerlines in the distance,
Followed by more trees,
Like pieces of broccoli
Against a light blue-painted antique plate,
Thin clouds surrounding
The fluffy vegetable heads.

Amazing what the bold-face
Subject line of an unread email can do:
Set a mine off
Even here, away
From the human-made.
The thing about “getting away”
Is that our minds still come along
For the ride.
At least out here,
Everything between me
And the sky
Is like water,
Muffling the explosions.

Cracks

The ants are confused.
Ordered, purposed, they are prisoners in a line,
tracing black, white erasing,
swallowing the brown bricks where a pencil lies in endless gray,
never touching the yellow of the pencil or its pink eraser.

The pencil is a monolith, a lead rib cage,
something for the ants to mount,
to go around, to tear down,
to tear down if they had the lazy power of youth—
but they eat,
drink,
and play,
distracted, neglectful,

lost amongst the masses of hills.

Abyss

I have been made a prophet
Of woe.

I have stumbled upon
A spiral staircase
That I do not know,

That only leads
Down.

I have followed it.

I have not met
A single gilled thing, crustacean,
Or coral ribcage. I have filled my lungs with salt.
I cannot hold my breath any longer
Than when I was a child.

I have scoured
The ocean floor,
Hoping to find a key
To the staircase's door.

I have surrounded myself
With disturbed sands
In the deep's vast black.
I am sick of my presence.

I wish that these thoughts
Were charred into my physical brain
And shown, with my scalp peeled back,
So that I could know something
Other
Than myself.

Empathy

Black permanent

Cardboard: marker, grungy
Starving. Christian

Two one dollar bills,
Outstretched Hand hanging, lonesome,
Forever
Waiting for red to turn.

“Do you believe God?”

Small, jagged paper
Exchanges hands.
Faded letters:
God hates Homosexuality
God hates Lesbianism

Eternity ends,
Engines rumble,
I return my hand to safety,
Untouched.

Death by a Freeway

It rained all day. Mulch turned to mud, grass drowned, the city's dirt ran fluidly.
Streets and sidewalks held murky ponds that even crows wouldn't touch.

He watched the cars hurdle past him. Each was clear and detailed momentarily—
Then disappeared. Pangs of dread refrigerated him.

His brain pumped anxiety through his body, made his bones heavier,
Compressed his heart, made the gap between his breaths last for minutes.

He forced his eyes shut. Blackness echoed.

His car's motor muttered death.

Gone Home

I come home to an email
that says
my friend's mother passed away.

I hesitate to call
because
I haven't talked to him in years.

His voice fills with tears.

I tell him
it's good to talk to him.

I wonder why I haven't called him sooner
as I
stumble through the conversation.

I look to the ceiling for guidance
as we
sit in silence.

I wonder why it's taken the end of a life
for me
to express my appreciation.

We share a few laughs.
My monitor goes black.

I take a sip of lukewarm coffee
as I
say goodbye,

turning off my computer.
My fingers hover over the keys,

the way his mother's spirit
must have hovered

over their bodies
in those final hours.

Ghostly Woods

There are ghostly woods at the end of the pasture
That can only be seen at night,
When silvery hues mix with white light of the moon,
Stars shine like shards of diamond licked by flame,
And the black sky shrouds the earth in long shadow.

To see these ghostly woods, all shades of gray
From black to white,
Is to feel the electrical pang,
The throbbing of the brain and tightness of the stomach,

To smell the rumbling motor, the gaseous oily stench,
To taste the thickness of it, and swallow medicine on an empty stomach.

To see these ghostly woods
Is to feel the grooves etched in stone,
To trace with calloused fingertips
Carved memories that emit a choke.

To see these ghostly woods is not enough alone.

To feel these ghostly woods
Is to travel them up close,
To see makeup caked on faces
On detailed high def screens,
To hear cackling and monotone
And sniff a candle made for fall,
Smell pumpkin and caramel
And taste them salted in the morning.

To feel these ghostly woods
Is to jump in a lake at winter,
To hear the whirring, swirling,
Cold, jagged winds,
To witness the final orange
Float from barren gray branches,
To see the sun set dying trees on fire.

To feel these woods alone is not enough.

Storm

From the stereo, a piano.
In my head, a war
Between success
And failure, a battleground frenzy.
The nodes and synapses of my
Colossal brain uproot themselves.
The battlefield is electrified by neurological pulses,
Lightning strikes, and I am left
Falling deeper into this leather seat,
Eyes burning, tears burning
Oils of my face into my eyes.
All I want to do
Is drive home, but I am pulled
By your crushed sedan, the crack
In your driver-side window,
The destroyed engine, still hot,
Hissing steam with every drop
Of the pouring rain.

Virgin Galactic

You were the ferris wheel at the Houston Aquarium.
I admired your lights and imagined the view
From your highest seat. When I finally saw downtown
From up there, the wheel kept turning,
And the skyline's lights slid, slowly, away.

You were the hot air balloon I took over Napa Valley.
The homes, swimming pools, and vineyards
Glistened in the sun, beautiful and irrelevant.
I didn't realize how much baggage you had
Until you pushed me over to stay afloat.

You were the Dreamliner that flew me across oceans.
I was a different person after the round-trip.
I wished the beehive-shaped parliament building,
The whale in the waterfront, and the shared hostel kitchen
Lasted longer. I'm still not sure how I made it home.

You were my first commercial space flight,
And we passed the atmosphere. We were supposed
To establish our orbit, share the view.
It took me a lifetime
To climb out of the crater left from our fiery plummet.

Ghosts and Jack-o'-Lanterns

The fountains were gushing
When I walked outside today.
The sound of the water
Hung in the air, and the leaves
Were colorful,
Having grown old.

That sign promoting
A Halloween campus event,
With its ghosts and jack-o'-lanterns,
Had a whole story behind it, someone
Who cares enough to spend the weekend
At home with her family, carving pumpkins.

Tradition
Clings to a household,
The way leaves cling to branches
In October wind.

Even fake smiles
Are cherished, an off-brand of warmth.

She'll come back to school
For Halloween,
And she'll miss the fake smiles, miss
Kids ringing the doorbell, miss
Sharing candy with her little sister,
And, waking up on a cold campus morning,
In a still-unfamiliar room,
Miss sitting next to Mom on the couch,
Sipping coffee,
Sharing the silence.

The next time she makes the road trip home,
She'll talk a little longer
Before retreating to her old room,
Squeeze tight
When hugging goodbye, upset
Mom and Dad, who,
For the first time, notice a change.

Souvenir

I.

You plucked me from my fatherland.

At the small park where the land
Touches the sea, where the stone man
Watches the waves of the bay

Crash upon boulders the way
Glass, dropped from surprised, limp hands,
Shatters against the floor,

You chose me to take away.

I was small and skippable.
You put me in your pocket,
Stole me from my brethren, away

From that landscape of green and gray.

I grew to know your care.

You washed away my filth,
The soapy water's warm encompass,
The rugged smoothness of the hand towel.

I grew to expect your fingertips.

Ripped again away from open air,
Into a backpack's smallest compartment,
I would have suffocated if I knew how to breathe.

I grew to know your neglect.

When you removed me,
The room was dim,
But at least lit, the surroundings

Unnatural, but at least visible:
Stacks of books, coasters,
A small kiwi bird,

A candle whose scent
I can no longer distinguish,
All waiting, like me, for touch.

II.

On any given day
At 333 Queens Drive,
Lyall Bay's waves slap gently

Against the large boulders
That form the boundaries
Of Dorrie Leslie Park,

Seagulls circle the circumference,
Riding the airwaves,
Gliding endlessly,

Effortlessly,
Encapsulated
In their elements,

And a lone moai statue
Stares intently
Over the waves

Toward Moa Point,
Where a timeless
Native reservation stands.

At Dorrie Leslie Park
Near the shores of Lyall Bay,
City buses stop, then rumble away,

Joggers jog by,
Kick up dry
Grass and dirt, and

Teens sit in their friends' cars,
Laughing and vaping. Occasionally,
Someone stops, looks across the bay,

Stands firm in the wind's face
As gusts bombard the shore,

Watches a few planes come and go,

Lingers long
Enough to read
About Easter Island,

The covenant
Between New Zealand and Chile,
And the significance

Of the large head of a man
And the ancient Pacific connection
That this gift represents.

III.

I occasionally pick up the rock
That sits on my desk
That I brought home

from Aotearoa. Although I hold it,
It does not feel
Like it is mine.

The memory, what it represents,
However, is, in its entirety,
Mine, and when I examine

This ordinary rock,
Its peaks and valleys,
Its trenches and cracks,

Its speckled surface,
Its remarkable smoothness,
Suddenly, it isn't ordinary.

It transports me to a park,
A patch of grass
Where I said goodbye.

I didn't know the roads—
Not well enough to realize
That I was nowhere near the hostel,

That I was sitting on a bus
Bound for its final stop,
Removed from the city.

I saw that I was the last passenger, and,
As the knot of dread formed in my stomach,
From his oversized rearview mirror,

The driver looked at me as if to say,
“Get off.” He was nice enough, thankfully,
And explained to me

That I boarded the wrong bus,
That I had been on the wrong side of the street
Back when I was still just two blocks

From the college campus.
I got off.
There was a nice little spot

Across the street—Queens Drive?—
A view of the coast
And a couple of empty benches.

What better way to contemplate
My fate—not just
The present circumstances, but

How far I’d come,
And what all I had
To look forward to.

I was crying by the time
I crossed the street
And came to a standstill.

The impossible sound
Of waves caressing the shore
Bored a hole into me.

The seagulls hung in the air
Against gales of wind, and,
At that spot,

At that time,
With the freedom of which I arrived,
Was the perfect ending

To a trip that was far from perfect.
Not even birds can fly
When the wind is at its peak,

When a storm threatens
The ocean's peace,
And turbulent winds

Make steering
Impossible. But the seagulls
Of that little park by the bay

Didn't seem to mind. Despite
The air's impossible trajectory,
The fact that flapping their wings

Accomplished nothing
And that rain was inevitable,
The seagulls continued to glide,

Adjusted to the conditions,
Took what they were given,
And kept moving forward—

Even when moving
Didn't get them
Anywhere at all.

Black Holes

Like the cruise ship you can just make out from the beach

Like the strange feeling of loss,
A pang unfamiliar—

When in second grade your best friend moves far away

Like the tv remote, an alien contraption
Whose black buttons you use too few of—

Like the sight in those spheres,
Those milky windows
Pierced with black holes
Of worry or else—

The look in your lover's eyes when you know something's wrong

Like hours, days, weeks
Outside of yourself,

Or inside,
In acid

Midnight in New Ulm

Crickets and cicadas
Chirp and croak
In harmony,
A chorus that says,
“We are here.”

In the distance,
Skyscrapers blink
Red and white,
Actors that say,
“So are we.”

Like the stars
That populate heaven,
When point-of-view
Shifts to the countryside,
City lights are magic.

But when city lights are home—
When you’re home in city lights—
They pollute the darkness
That tries to drown the sky,
Aches to reveal the stars.

A giant spider
Rests on its web
Between the stainless
Steel grill and
Wooden rocking chair.

The darkest things creep out at night.
History tries to convince us
That beginnings are bright. In reality,
Beginnings are necessarily dark.
Night

Is the birth of a new day. Beginnings
Are black; history
Has made endings black,
But during the drive to dinner,
I saw

The end of a day. I saw the sky's face.
God was painting a masterpiece,
And the animals had stopped to watch.
If a breeze carried away
The petals of every Texas phlox,

And deposited in layers across the sky
This beauty,
And these petals became heavy
With the moisture
Of the silky clouds,

And finally, God added a hue
Of pink lemonade,
It might have looked like that sky,
And he might have been tempted
To suspend the sun.

The Coconut Tree
After Frank O'Hara's "Cornkind"

In paradise, there's Margot Robbie
Sitting under a coconut tree, reading
Joseph Campbell. She's pregnant and wearing
A red dress, red lipstick, and

A golden chastity belt. She's
An angel,
With silky gold wings and
A welcoming smile.

One by one, dreamers come to see
The angel in red, the Hollywood honey
From Australia's outback,
Only to find

That the palm tree
Shading her milky skin

Is growing human heads
That land with a thud,
One by one, that she cracks open
And consumes.

Metamorphosis

Mountain peak,
Bald head burnished by light,
Suddenly foreseeable
Through dying clouds.

Worn old man,
Combed back, gray hair,
Slouched in his rocker, speaking with his hands.

